Neoliberal New York: Contemporary literature and the politics of urban redevelopment

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In July 2018, Target, the second largest department store retailer in the United States, launched its East Village store occupying the corner of a two-tower rental complex on East 14th Street. Owned by Extell, one of New York's top real estate developers, the building is dubbed EVGB (East Village Greatest Building), an acronym which ironically echoes that of CBGB, the famous punk-rock club on the Bowery, shuttered in 2006, and replaced by a John Varvatos designer store.[1] Reporting the opening of Target, *6sqft*, the New York real estate and architecture news website, claimed 'it's clearly long past the time anyone in the neighborhood would grumble about the arrival of a chain store'.[2] In the spirit of 'pulling back the curtain on New York', a New York of encroaching big developer real estate, *6sqfeet* in fact argues that the changes in the built environment, consumerist practices and social composition of the city's most iconic neighbourhood are now so natural that they are long past the stage of local opposition. Indeed, a branch of a department store in the East Village is not at all an uncommon picture but simply another layer of business-led redevelopment and amenities added to the neighbourhood since the advent of New York's entrepreneurial urbanism in the 1970s and 1980s. It is also true that in the 1980s, resistance was more rambunctious; resistance was the norm. As Jeremiah Moss documents in *Vanishing New York: How A Great City Lost Its Soul* (2017), when the first Gap store opened in St. Marks' Place and replaced St. Mark's Cinema on the Lower East Side in 1988, there was collective outrage decrying the disappearance of the neighbourhood. 'There goes the neighbourhood' was the slogan that galvanised collective action.[3]

The peculiarity of Target's arrival in the East Village lies, however, not only in the actual opening of the store's branch or the absence of local opposition, but also in the celebration of an original, long-gone neighbourhood that the corporate retailer chose as a marketing strategy. Playing on sentiments of nostalgia and desire for authenticity and iconic living, the store's building was awkwardly historicised and romanticised, draped in images of

[1] J. Moss, 'Targeting the East Village', *Jeremiah's Vanishing New York*, 21 July (2018) https://vanishingnewyork.blogspot.com/2018/07/targeting-east-village.html?fbclid=IwAR1Kae5b4Ig80DsK2SP36nL-fx8C1jN2W0yn933NfNX9zGhHlVi2La3NqNY
[2] M. Cohen, 'New East Village Target store now open in Extell's EVGB rental building', *6sqft*, 19 July (2018)
[3] J. Moss, *Vanishing New York: How a Great City Lost Its Soul* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2017)

sanitised tenements with fire escapes, including a replica of the CBGB club and a poets' café redolent of the late twentieth-century literary scene, now defunct. On his blog, Moss described the chain store's opening as 'the most deplorable commodification of local neighbourhood culture' and expressed a sense of confusion, loss and dystopia triggered by this simulacrum of urban experience and representation.[4] A feature of neoliberal urbanism, this event epitomises the '"as-if" city, a narcissistic city that presents a cold shell and calls it real.'[5] Through mimicry, re-creation or re-enactment, authenticity thus becomes the new urban living of those who move into in a neighbourhood, remake and recode its places, character, history or social relations.[6] Through testimonies of loss, recollection, contestation, reflection and organised opposition, authenticity is the political project of those who are displaced from their own neighbourhoods, symbolically and spatially, at times violently. As a researcher in cultural stories of urban gentrification, I propose a critical bird's-eye-view of such testimonies, both non-fictional and fictional, in order to reinforce the argument that cultural scripts of urbanisation are as compelling and useful in our understanding of cities like New York as urban fieldwork per se.[7] Zooming in on post-1990s writing, with flashbacks to the 1980s, is only natural as New York's neoliberal urban regime of the Finance, Insurance and Real Estate (FIRE) industry has now consolidated, the consequences of its politics have become hard felt and highly visible to individuals and communities on the ground while the writers' reflective and critical urban consciousness has stayed equally engaging since the raucously activist 1980s.

Located in the city's 'deep history', Jeremiah Moss's *Vanishing New York* is one of the most powerful and rich engagements with a disappearing New York. Based on the heavy-duty documentary work behind his ongoing digital blog, Moss's 2017 critical memoir is written in the vein of both journalistic story-telling and anthropological description, combining molecular episodes of places and social relations, historical geographies of neighbourhoods in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx, personal narratives as well as urbanist theories of place making, and unmaking, through urban planning, activism and political decisions. Avowedly emotional and biased, *Vanishing New York* uses the language of the psyche as a political discursive tool to articulate the tensions between city, individual and community politics. Moss artfully connects a systemic understanding of gentrification and the suburbanising ideology of

[4] Moss, 'Targeting the East Village'
[5] Moss, *Vanishing New York*, p. 411
[6] For a discussion of authenticity, see S. Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Places* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010)
[7] I make this argument in a book-length study of 1970s and 1980s New York Literature: C. Neculai, *Urban Space and Late Twentieth-Century New York Literature: Reformed Geographies* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014)

redevelopment in New York City with small scale disruptions of people's lives and legacies in the neighbourhoods, like the closing down of the De Robertis Pasticceria & Caffe on First Avenue in the East Village after 110 years of service to the community.[8] The emotional, analytical and political work woven into such grassroots stories frames the factual and the documentary and creates proxies for social and spatial activism.

Jeremiah Moss is not alone in these kinds of critical gestures. Other writers, oral historians and journalists have tackled gentrification and its deleterious effects on the spirit and materiality of their own communities. In a *Harper's* article suggestively headlined 'The Death of a Once Great City: The Fall of New York and the Urban Crisis of Affluence' (2018), Kevin Baker decries the destruction of the public city by private equity funds, absentee landlords and the new rich infesting the city.[9] Published in the same year, *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality and the Fight for the Neighborhood* by Peter Moskowitz presents an open indictment of corporate urban governance in New York City but also in New Orleans, Detroit and San Francisco, connecting Moskowitz's own lived experiences, the changing faces of his community with analyses of state-led gentrification. Just like Moss, Moskowitz, perceives gentrification as trauma conjuring up 'mental geographies of loss'.[10] Unlike Moss, who moved to New York in 1993 'at the beginning of its end […] quite possibly the worst moment to get attached to New York', Moskowitz was born in the West Village, 'a few blocks from where Jane Jacobs wrote *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*'.[11] Through his family's history, he acknowledges his double and conflicting status as both middle class gentrifier and gentrified, having been priced out of his own neighbourhood. But for Moskowitz 'the gentrifier in the mirror' syndrome is the very foundation of his activism; he does not just write an 'elegy to New York' but also seeks to find solutions for 'an ungentrified future' in which urban planning becomes more democratic and community-oriented, grassroots protest intensifies, and gentrification slows down.[12]

In *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (2012), written in the years following the 2008 financial crisis, New York writer Sarah Schulman makes a similarly

[8] Moss, *Vanishing New York*, pp. 27-30
[9] K. Baker, 'The death of a once great city: The fall of New York and the urban crisis of affluence', *Harper's* July (2018) https://harpers.org/archive/2018/07/the-death-of-new-york-city-gentrification/?fbclid=IwAR1Q2YKBju1BWCezpqzcGJpeu5eArxfiAoVSc-olHuXiCJwLfjkUzeBla4g
[10] P. Moskowitz, *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality and the Fight for the Neighborhood* (New York, NY: Nation Books, 2018), p. 167
[11] Moss, *Vanishing New York*, p. 1; Moskowitz, *How to Kill a City*, p. 164
[12] J. Schlitchtman and J. Patch, 'Gentrifier? Who, me? Interrogating the gentrifier in the mirror', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38 (4), pp. 1491-1508; Moskowitz, *How to Kill a City*, p. 209

intriguing argument that gentrification is somehow coming to an end because the finance industry can no longer hold.[13] Beyond this, Schulman historicises gentrification in New York via its consequences on the discourses of AIDS, the ACT UP movement and the urban practices of queer communities. In her account, not only does gentrification has socio-material implications but also spiritual, political, literary and ethical ones. 'The fusion phenomenon' is not just a morphing of cuisine dishes, flavours and tastes; homogenisation is also the attack on all forms of diversity, non-conformism, social activism, complexity and rich sub-cultures.[14] Before Schulman, in 1999, Samuel Delany wrote *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, appending an urban sociological analysis of spatial relations to an autobiographical narrative.[15] The book is a complex response to the 1992 redevelopment of Times Square by the Rudolph Giuliani administration, the city's first major rezoning project that decimated the area's diverse and edgy places, countercultural and marginalised communities with their alternative life styles in order to create a neat, controlled, sanitised and glamorous space for tourism.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been a surge in such stories about places, buildings, institutions, neighbourhoods, social and activist experiences, diverse demographics becoming divided or dislocated across New York's boroughs, particularly in the historic districts. In Moss's own words, the 'nostalgia business' can capture the vanishing materiality of the city through the many real or imaginary stories of a New York that would otherwise be irretrievable.[16] In these narratives, the sense of transience and transformation is affective, personal, spiritual and symbolic only insofar as it is socio-spatial, tangible, material and political. As the city has been developed out of sync with its older self, and in spite of its older self, through a calculated and fairly aggressive process of disinvestment, investment and rezoning, one way to resist has been to observe, to research, to bear witness, to document, to tell and create stories, to capture and preserve experiences, images, maps and urban contact zones that are lost or in danger of getting lost. From oral histories to written and visual urban ethnographies, from research analyses to essayistic reflection and documentation, from fictional to non-fictional writing, from urban realism to urban symbolism, the discourses of loss, trauma, divisions, inequities, urban (in)justice, new and old urbanites and urbanisms, become entangled in the generous field of contemporary New York literature.

[13] S. Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2012)
[14] Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind*, p. 31
[15] S. R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999)
[16] Moss, *Vanishing New York*, p. 405

The revival of writing about the city and its neighbourhoods, especially book-length writing, has paralleled the vengeful revival of its most recent phase of gentrification: hyper or super gentrification.[17] The large-scale urban development of both gentrifying and already gentrified areas, such as Harlem and the East Village, has been resourced by global finance capital, of the kind that the City, via its urban agencies and big developers like Extell, has been injecting down to neighbourhood level, often against the best interests of the local communities. In the 1980s and 1990s, gentrification still appeared to be a project of beautification, sanitisation or restauration of derelict building stock and public spaces in the aftermath of the critical 1970s. The City and private landlords were leading on this hostile process of urban development, concealing the fact that urban decay had also been a deliberate structural intervention, at worst, or negligence, at best. In 1993, Robert Fitch historicised 'the assassination of New York' by industrial, financial and real estate elites, claiming that this aggressive socio-spatial restructuring preceded, in fact, the neoliberal, post-industrial period that had commenced in the mid- to late-1970s.[18] In 1996, Neil Smith announced the rise of the 'revanchist city' against its marginalised and less wealthy inhabitants.[19] Then, in the wake of 9/11, an unjust and levelling urbanism would only intensify. 'Gentrification generalised' is, in the powerful words of Kevin Baker, 'the systematic, wholesale transformation of New York into a reserve of the obscenely wealthy and the barely here—a place increasingly devoid of the idiosyncrasy, the complexity, the opportunity, and the roiling excitement that make a city a great'.[20] Yet, hypergentrification is more than the making of an 'unremarkable New York', more than the showcasing of 'an empty simulacrum of what [New York] was', more than a symbolic process. Via urban governing tactics and planning tools, hypergentrification has consistently led to the destruction and recreation of neighbourhood character, the uprooting of local residents and their small businesses, the crisis of economic affordability, even for the middle classes, the rise in poverty and homelessness, the loss of social ties, the reconfiguring of class, racial and ethnic diversity through cultural and socio-economic homogenisation, the standardisation and upscaling of tastes and lifestyles as well as the material reinvention of historical heritage and authenticity.

[17] L. Lees, 'Super-gentrification: The Case of Brooklyn Heights, New York City', *Urban Studies* 40 (12) (2003), 2487-2509; Moss, *Vanishing New York*, p. 39
[18] R. Fitch, *The Assassination of New York* (London: Verso, 1993)
[19] N. Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996)
[20] N. Smith cited in Moss, *Vanishing New York*, p. 38; Zukin, *Naked City*. p. 9; Baker, 'The death of a once great city'

These are all thematic codes in contemporary literature about urban transformations in New York City during the so-called Second or New Gilded Age.[21] Some of the themes saturate the narratives of a certain urban realism. Stories about the loss of an authentic New York and the weakening of the urban middle class amidst the decline of affordable housing in a hypergentrifying metropolis make up the novels of Jay McInerney, *Bright, Precious Days* (2016) and Cheryl Mendelson, *Morningside Heights* (2005).[22] In a richly descriptive and dynamic style, they show the lives of two white middle-class families, the Calloways and the Braithwaits, at turning points in their residential lives in TriBeCa and Morningside Heights when they are on the verge of being priced out of their buildings and neighbourhoods. Tenant activism, tenant-landlord relations, urban decay, precarious housing and homelessness are the very substance of *No Lease on Life* (1998) by Lynn Tillman whose unforgiving, sarcastic register makes for an engaging urban read.[23] Short stories in John Freeman's collection of *Tales of Two Cities: The Best and Worst of Times in Today's New York* (2014) openly narrate the social 'landscapes of asymmetry', grassroots mobilising, and housing deprivation, straddling the boundaries between the fictional and the non-fictional.[24] Other codes of urbanised living are less explicitly foregrounded in literature; they are written in the margins of fictions about a symbolic city, about subjectivity or social issues that are not inherently spatialised, like education, cultural relations or social diversity, and thus require fine-grained reading and careful spotting. A case in point, Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* (2009) is a novel about the life of archivist and cultural critic Perkus Tooth, resident on the Upper East Side, and his social circles, including the friendship with Chase Insteadman, the narrator.[25] *Chronic City* recounts a postmodern, quasi-dystopic 'alternate Manhattan', 'the chaotic intricacy' of a city that 'only pretend[s] to be as orderly as a grid' (7).[26] However, material, social and political New York comes up in unexpected ways: an upper-class neighbourhood opposed to rezoning, a recurring teasing metaphor of urban creative destruction or residual tenant activism collusive with city politics. Although realist in its city life descriptions, Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) falls in the same category of the non-openly urbanised.[27] Cole's is primarily a biographical account about

[21] Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind*, p. 18.
[22] J. McInerney, *Bright, Precious Days* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016); C. Mendelson, *Morningside Heights* (New York: Random House, 2005); all subsequent references are to these editions and page numbers will be given in brackets.
[23] L. Tillman, *No Lease on Life* (San Diego, NY, London: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998)
[24] J. Freeman (ed.), *Tales of Two Cities: The Best and Worst of Times in Today's New York* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2014)
[25] J. Lethem, *Chronic City* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009)
[26] G. Cowles, 'Another World', *New York Times* 22 October (2009)
[27] T. Cole, *Open City* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011)

the city of ethnic and racial diversity, New York as an urban 'collection of tribes' (204), and about the narrator's personal journeys. Yet, during his flâneries from Morningside Heights, a starting walking point of sorts, his gaze recognises the spaces of neoliberalised New York, albeit with a certain subdued critical consciousness. In contrast, a heightened urban consciousness underlies Colson Whitehead's *The Colossus of New York: A City in Thirteen Parts* (2003), a series of musings on different places and transit experiences in New York that embed the realist, material city within the symbolic, subjective one.[28] Behind its tropes, aphorisms, symbolisms or rebellious syntax, *The Colossus* does not let go of material and political New York.

Regardless of their urbanised realist or symbolic narrative mode, there is in these New York literary texts a compelling nexus of mental, symbolic, material, social and political geographies that can be unravelled via the socio-spatial thematic codes with which urban geography operates. Taken together as a representational aggregate, contemporary literature appears resourceful enough to shape a solid and fairly rigorous insight into urban governance, community formations, socio-spatial relations, to create its own histories of the city's neoliberal urbanisation. This resourcefulness becomes even more evident when the reading of the literary is mindful of the non-fictional and urbanist literature that is, in the words of the protagonist of *Bright Lights, Big City*, factually verified, or culturally documented.[29] Only then do the imagined, urbanised social fields in fictional literature acquire added critical value.

Written in a powerfully cultural vein, *Nonstop Metropolis: A New York City Atlas* (2018) edited by Rebecca Solnit and Joshua Jelly-Schapiro offers such rich juxtapositions.[30] The atlas is a tribute to the city's vibrancy, dynamism and diversity condensed in 'twenty-six maps and essays, along with some oral histories and illustrations'. In this wonderfully curated portable museum of New York, readers can retrieve the city in its almost infinite dimensions: literary, economic, ecological, political, cultural, historical, gendered, racial, ethnic, sentimental, dynamic, emplaced, displaced and replaced, rioting and conforming, crashed and rising, made and unmade, infrastructural, public and private, secular and spiritual. New York's contrasting ideologies of urban planning and development are presented in two complementary documents. 'Makers and Breakers: Olmsted, Moses, Jacobs Shape the City' maps the three urban planners' professional biographies and hotspots of 'realized and unrealized' plans onto

[28] C. Whitehead, *The Colossus of New York: A City in Thirteen Parts* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003)
[29] J. McInerney, *Bright Lights, Big City* (London: Flamingo, 1984)
[30] R. Solnit and J. Jelly-Schapiro, *Nonstop Metropolis: A New York City Atlas* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2018)

the actual map of the City: landmark parks, elevated roads, expressways, friendly neighbourhoods.[31] Next to it, 'Ways and Means' by Jonathan Tarleton recounts the story of these competing visions for New York, based either on a process of destruction, clearance and rebuilding or else preservation and cultivation.[32] Robert Moses had a grand-scale vision for New York, a city transited by big arteries following slash and burn development tactics, punctured by large public spaces (like Olmsted's landmark parks), buildings and institutions. In contrast, Jane Jacobs imagined a city of sustainable neighbourhoods, walkers and random street encounters, fostering cultural diversity, local commerce, and small-scale community building.

Just like *Nonstop Metropolis*, John Freeman's edited *Tales of Two Cities* recognises this necessity to include the literary next to the documentary, experiential or critical accounts that 'change the way we talk about [New York's urban] inequality'.[33] Via such a combined outlook, 'the city's narrative – of it being a special place, a city of dreams – shreds in the face of reality: the city's income disparity is as big as it has ever been.'[34] Representation becomes, therefore, imbued with socio-spatial responsibility and to reinforce this mandate, *Tales of Two Cities* brings together a collective of thirty writers many of whom appeared at the Housing Works Bookstore Café, 'a downtown arts space and bookstore that is one hub among a larger network of thrift stores and bookshops that raise money to provide housing' as well as other training and advocacy for homeless people in New York.[35] A part of the proceeds from the sale of the collection will be an endowment for the Housing Works community organisation. Such a socially engaged spatial fix for the writers' collective is reminiscent of the 1980s downtown community hotspots like St. Mark's Church on the Lower East Side that also hosted writers involved in the publication of literary magazines with an urban inclination such as *The Portable Lower East Side* or *Between C & D*.

These conjure up a notion of cultural and urban bohemia that is now both symbolically and materially extinct, which prompts, on the one hand, a sense of nostalgia and mourning over the loss of a personal, authentic New York, and on the other hand, a more sober, realistic and demystifying stance towards the urban grittiness of the 1970s and 1980s. In *The Colossus of New York*, Whitehead records the nostalgia over places that are gone: pizza parlours, delis, old coffee shops, the filth of 1970s Harlem, one of his first city memories. He relates a New York

[31] Solnit and Jelly-Schapiro, *Nonstop Metropolis*, pp. 136-7
[32] J. Tarleton, 'Ways and means' in Solnit and Jelly-Schapiro, *Nonstop Metropolis*, pp. 134-9.
[33] J. Freeman, 'Introduction' in Freeman, *Tales of Two Cities*, pp. vii-xvi, ix
[34] Freeman, 'Introduction', x
[35] Freeman, 'Introduction', xv

subjectivity to one's ability to remember these places, buildings and experiences that are no more, and the reality of New York to the act of witnessing and recollecting it, all ultimately connected to one's existence in the city.

> You are a New Yorker, the first time you say: that used to be Munsey's, or that used to be the TicToc Lounge. That before the internet café plugged itself in, you got your shoes resoled in the mom-and-pop operation that used to be there. You are a New Yorker when what was there before is more real and solid that what is here now. […] if you didn't witness it, it is not part of your New York. (3)

A similar obsession with what it means to be a New Yorker, with what makes a New York identity runs through *Bright, Precious Days* at the moment when the life of the Calloway family in TriBeCa is threatened by prohibitive rents and house prices, rising building maintenance fees and upscale, expensive neighbourhood conveniences. For Russell Calloway, his life downtown, in the neighbourhoods of SoHo, East Village or TriBeCa, is 'an irreducible core of his identity' (234), intimately tied to his and Corrine's early days in the city in the 1980s when they became part of the 'Art and Love team' of middle class creatives and old bohemians.

The Calloways and their social circle invoke a nostalgia for the 1980s 'cheap and funky' (232) downtown when they were throwing 1920s-style parties, lived in 'illegal sublets and shared railroad flats in Hell's Kitchen' (79). The novel is the third act of a trilogy representing New York primarily as a socio-spatial contract with historically changing terms and conditions, detailing the working and social lives of the Calloway, their Manhattan middle class entourage and twisted relationships. The Calloways are Midwesterners who graduated from Brown and moved to the city in the 1980s to work in the publishing industry (Russell), the finance sector and charity organisations for the destitute (Corrine). They navigate a fluctuating FIRE market and a city in three critical moments: the Market Crash of 1987 *(Brightness Falls*, 1992), 9/11 and its aftermath (*The Good Life*, 2006) and the mortgage crisis of 2008 (*Bright, Precious Days*, 2016).[36] There is, therefore, a sense of longitudinal progression as well as a conjunctural perspective on the lives of the Callowaways, and implicitly on a New York increasingly unaffordable, homogenised and commodified, taken over by the 'Power and Money team' (234).

[36] J. McInerney, *Brightness Falls* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992); J. McInerney, *The Good Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006)

Triggered by her past relationship with Jeff Pierce, family friend and urban realist writer killed by AIDS in 1987 at the end of *Brightness Falls*, Corrine's memories of the 1980s are inscribed in the very built environment of Manhattan's neighbourhoods like East Village, SoHo or TriBeCa. In the East Village, during one of her illicit love visits to Luke, Corrine experiences a 'weird frisson of recognition' of the architectural details of the gentrified buildings. 'A slumming dilettante' (40), she remembers the area as the 'desolate, abandoned' and 'most frightening corner of the city' (153) but, just like Colson Whitehead or Jeremiah Moss, she ties the memory of desolation to her own personal New York that cannot be wiped away by gentrification.

> […] the building she remembered had a filthy, sooty façade with rust showing through the peeling paint. But of course, the neighbourhood had been transformed, like the rest of the city. It sort of made her sad how polished and prosperous and tasteful it had become, like the streets of SoHo the real art galleries replaced by shopping mall versions…. – as if gentrification were a disservice to Jeff's memory, as if everything should have stayed dirty and dangerous forever' (331)

Despite her affective reaction to gentrification, Corrine does not wish to 'get nostalgic for the era of muggings and graffiti and crack vials in the hallway. She's almost said AIDS but stopped herself in time. She didn't want to scratch that scar' (51). Neighbourhood filth, noise, garbage, junkies and aggressive homelessness create acutely sober, if erratic, emotions for proofreader Elizabeth in *No Lease on Life*, a novel that completely takes nostalgia out of urban poverty: 'The poor scrambled, adapted, and metamorphosed into their poverty. The rich grew ugly too' (33). Lynn Tillman scales the perspective down to a building in downtown Manhattan neglected by the landlord who violates most building codes. In navigating her seedy residential conditions, Elizabeth, whose narrating stance and viewpoint drive the entire fiction, experiences hatred, anger and murderous sentiments, and imagines crime scenarios in which she could be involved as a result of these. She manages, however, to reroute these sentiments towards tenant activism mitigating the relationship between the residents in her building and the municipality.

De-romanticising the New York of dereliction, poverty, garbage, crime and the AIDS epidemic may be the premise upon which the body of the city can be improved for everyone, not just exclusively for the rich in luxurious enclaves. In 'If the 1 Percent Stifles New York's Creative Talent, I'm out of Here', one of the *Tales of Two Cities*, David Byrne pleads for an

inclusive and egalitarian city whose soul is also mended and whose health is not damaged by real estate, the real driver behind the historical process of urban creative destruction.[37] A state and city-led process, the ascendance and consolidation of FIRE as the main engine of urban growth in New York at the expense of community-driven redevelopment has slowly but surely led to a spatial and social reconfiguration of the city's neighbourhoods. In short, through policies of disinvestment and reinvestment, creative destruction has meant the erasure or shrinking of the old to make room for the new: buildings, class and ethnic demographics, places of leisure and culture, businesses, lifestyles.[38] Witness to the city's destruction and vulnerability in the 1970s and 1980s, in 'New York City: Seeing through the Ruins' from *Nonstop Metropolis*, Marshall Berman looks back at the burning buildings of the South Bronx, his home neighbourhood and demystifies this 'urban picturesque' with its 'whole new vocabulary and iconography' of ruins and destruction.[39] While 'urban ruins make for great visuals', he puts into historical perspective the hegemonic, creatively destructive connivance between urban governance and the FIRE industry.

In *Chronic City*, Jonathan Lethem develops a superbly fitting metaphor for creative destruction and the threat it epitomises: a gargantuan escaped tiger that ravages the city on the East Side up to Spanish Harlem. The feral feline acquires a clearer symbolism as the narrative progresses and although this symbolism remains unstable throughout, its urban signifieds are captivating: the tiger could be 'a city operative' or 'a bulldozing machine' destroying the city, 'being used by the city to un-home its enemies' (336, 162) and make room for developers to move in. The metaphor links creative destruction to the revanchist city, thus revealing the true meaning of urban renewal: 'a tiger could be a homeless man's emblem, of the terrors that pursued him' (29). In its penchant for postmodernist devices, *Chronic City* proposes a virtual reality New York opened to infinite possibilities for its neighbourhoods that could be designed by 'deviants and avant-gardists' alike, thus democratising urban planning to the extreme. By the same token, *The Colossus of New York* is only deceptive in doing away with an objectively perceived New York, reconstructed through gentrification and impersonal urban planning. Whitehead does acknowledge that 'damage has been done to the city' (8) and 'developers plot demise, plot repeal of zoning-laws vis-à-vis mandatory public space' (117). He ominously

[37] D. Byrne, 'If the 1 percent stifles New York's creative talent, I'm out of here' in J. Freeman, *Tales of Two Cities*, pp. 242-6

[38] A recent and well-researched book on creative destruction is A. Busá, *The Creative Destruction of New York: Engineering the City for the Elites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)

[39] M. Berman, New York City: Seeing through the ruins' in Solnit and Jelly-Schapiro, *Nonstop Metropolis*, pp.119-31

voices concerns over the end of a city that is no longer collectively planned and built. 'One day the city we built will be gone, and when it goes, we go. We the buildings fall, we topple, too. Maybe we become New Yorkers, the day we realise that New York will go on without us.' (9) *The Colossus* diagnoses evident tensions between community-minded planning and urban politics based on exclusionary zoning laws, city branding and competition, 'the brochure, movies, tv shows and songs, the whole If You Can Make It There business' (3). From behind his rhetorical figurations, Whitehead makes an important point about what New York is becoming, a city that neglects its citizens, excludes them from decision-making, and displaces those who do not conform to the new ideal of normative urbanism. 'Wouldn't it be funny if the city actually gave a damn about you'; 'if only there were zoning laws to regulate strange thoughts. Keep them in other neighborhoods.' (80) There is some noteworthy urban theorising buried in this experimentalist prose.

Equally, there is some deep historicising of urbanisation processes in realist fictions. In *Open City*, Teju Cole peels off the historical layers of erasure on sites like that of the former World Trade Centre - 'The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten.' (58) - or of civic and cultural institutions like the Loews 175th Street Theatre (233). In the same vein, Cheryl Mendelson's *Morningside Heights* historicises the neighbourhood of Columbia University, alongside an observable social dynamic at neighbourhood and building scale. The pretext for Mendelson's urban fiction is the death of Elizabeth Miller, a 103-year old lady who occupied, until the time of her death, a rent-controlled apartment at 635 West 117th Street, the same building where Anne and Charles Braithwait, the middle-class musicians, live with their children. The novel is rooted in the urban history of Morningside Heights, with this turn-of-the-century, 1906 building and its social make-up, at the centre. This is a neighbourhood of civically and intellectually minded people, remote from both the coarse bohemianism and monied classes of the downtown. The historic ebb and flow in its development are, therefore, presented with a keen eye to its changing class and ethnic composition alongside the transformation and repurposing of its built environment. Having undergone periods of decline from a predominantly middle-class area, incorporating 'poorer and rougher elements' (14), SRO (Single Room Occupancy) buildings, and a markedly visible ethnic and racial diversity spilling over from adjacent Harlem, Morningside Heights is seen to experience a housing boom that leads to an infusion of new comers displacing the neighbourhood's older residents.

Following Liz Miller's death, an informal investigation reveals that Mrs Miller had two wills, one of which entrusted her apartment to Eugene Baker, her guardian. Parallel to this case of inheritance and rent regulation forensics, there is the housing case of the Braithwaits who

are forced to move out to the suburbs after fifteen years of residence, having sold their apartment to a Wall Street couple. Their dilemmas of displacement are as obsessive as the Calloways' in *Bright, Precious* Days, with a marked difference: their struggle to stay put is a community affair, not just a family one. Determining the fraudulent nature of Baker's inheritance and establishing that Liz Miller was actually murdered by her guardian, the Braithwaits become the rightful heirs to Miller's apartment. By rewriting the legal contracts of their housing, they manage to stall the gentrification of their building that was already under way via new management regulations meant to increase housing prices, overregulate social behaviour and ultimately push renters and residents out.

The Braithwaits, just like the Calloways, are very much aware that gentrification is about market forces, speculators and the infusion of big money into neighbourhoods, and less concerned with the enabling role of city politics. They are also painfully conscious that due to their white middle-class status, they remain first-wave gentrifiers: the Braithwaits on Morningside Heights, the Calloways through their relocation from TriBeCa (The Triangle Below Canal Street, one of New York's early places dubbed into real estate code) to a townhouse in disrepair in SoHa, the newly minted gentrifying area South of 125th Street in Harlem, which also appealed to Russell's sense of bohemian romance, thus reinforcing the stereotype of the inmoving gentrifiers. If the action of *Morningside Heights* takes place within the boundaries of the Upper West Side neighbourhood, *Bright, Precious Days* adds a transnational dimension to gentrification showing how it does, indeed, become generalised and how, for example, gentrification in New York responds to trend-setting patterns in London or other cities financed by big corporate capital. 'Corrine marvelled anew at the upscape boutiques that had infested SoHo ever since Prada invaded – Chanel and Longchamp and Burberry- wondering when exactly Manhattan had become a collection of luxury brand and franchise outlets: Dubai on the Hudson.' (202) To the rise of the luxury city and the invasion of the new rich, both novels oppose 'quality of life crimes', like the soup kitchen line outside St. Ursula's Church on Morningside Heights or the food charity organisation, 'Nourish New York' for which Corrine Calloway works.[40] As a process of creative destruction, the socio-spatial dynamic of gentrification cannot but expose its landscapes of social and economic precarity.

The areas of poverty and deprivation, just like those of affluence, are identifiable by zip codes, real estate code names or street numbers which become borders between favourable and unfavourable maps. In *Chronic City,* Chase Insteadman is reluctant to slum into Manhattan's

[40] Mendelson, *Morningside Heights*, p. 19

triple digit areas like that north of 125th in Harlem: 'the dismaying city-scape, the slate brown monolithic pre-ward tenements, the rusted Coca-Cola-sponsored bodega signs' are an 'unfriendly map' (105) to him. In 'Due North', another narrative in *Tales of Two Cities*, Garnette Cadogan is akin to an urban anthropologist observing New York's 'topography of social conditions' (1) from the Upper East Side, one of the wealthiest zip codes in United States, to Hunts Point in the South Bronx, one of the city's poorest neighbourhoods.[41] Interestingly, Cadogan finds segregation to be a common denominator between the two areas: the former quarantined in its homogeneity, lack of diversity and rich urban contact zones; the latter, isolated in its deprivation and lack of economic and social resources. In 'Zapata Boulevard' from the same collection, Valeria Luiselli contrasts other kinds of maps: the real estate and the symbolic, personal, cultural and historic ones in Spanish Harlem.[42] Luiselli sees the redemptive capacities of mapping other kinds of ethnically minded geographies to wipe away the negatively symbolic maps most Mexicans occupy in disempowering ways: corners, street carts, underground storage rooms, overcrowded homes, detention centres, deportation limbos or bicycle lanes delivery systems (206). Another urban index of precarity is homelessness, represented under multiple guises: the unmarked homelessness hidden in the affable social interaction between two men sitting outside the post office in *Open City* (185); the redeemed homelessness of Biller in *Chronic City*, of Tim Freeman in 'Home', or the temporarily redeemed homelessness of Paulie in *No Lease on Life*, and, in the same novel, the hostile homelessness of the 'crusties' Elizabeth meets in her neighbourhood; the invisible yet dignified homelessness of Denise in Colum McCann's 'Near the Edge of Darkness'.[43]

These uneven landscapes of gentrification raise important questions about whose city New York is and shapes grassroots politics and community activism from soft social engagement to hard-core political and legal action. Opposing the hegemonic power of corporate urban governance, struggles over the right to the city mean to restore the right to decent housing as a human right or the right to the public space of the city. Anne Braithwait's 'symbolic citizen action' in *Morningside Heights* or Corrine Calloway's food charity work in *Bright, Precious Days* represent milder forms of everyday engagement with the socio-economic life in the city. *No Lease on Life*, on the other hand, is a narrative almost entirely built on the daily labour of tenant activism and mobilising action. Elizabeth, and her neighbour,

[41] G. Cadogan, 'Due North' in J. Freeman, *Tales of Two Cities*, pp. 1-11
[42] V. Luiselli, 'Zapata Boulevard' in J. Freeman, *Tales of Two Cities*, pp. 196-208
[43] T. Freeman, 'Home' in J. Freeman, *Tales of Two Cities*, pp. 210-14; C. McCann, 'Near the edge of darkness' in J. Freeman, *Tales of Two Cities*, pp. 49-52

Ernest, carry out thorough documentation for a grievance dossier to the City's Housing Department against the neglect and serious violations of their tenant rights by their landlord. 'A continuum between greed and laziness', in Sarah Jaffe's words, this landlord negligence is part of the eviction epidemic in gentrifying areas, like Crown Heights, Brooklyn.[44] 'A Block Divided Against Itself' is Jaffe's tale of resident power movements, including coalition formations, like the Crown Heights Tenant Union, public rallies, outreach work, town hall meetings, tenant testimonies against landlord harassment. A complementary story of activism is DW Gibson's 'Partially Vacated', an oral record of housing court activism: a lawyer's efforts to stop evictions (not gentrification) and a tenant's fight in court for her New York home.[45]

The personal stories of gentrification in its latest, generalised phase are numerous. DW Gibson's own *The Edge Becomes the Center: An Oral History of Gentrification in the Twenty-First Century* (2015) is proof that the meanings and experiences of those affected by this process of urban development are disparate, and yet connected by the same concern that 'money pushes everything out of its way'.[46] Contemporary culture is certainly not oblivious to the challenges this poses for individuals and communities in neighbourhoods across the city. Community hubs like the Bronx Documentary Centre or ARTs East New York stand on the frontiers of gentrification and put culture to good use as awareness raising tactical tools in defence of their communities. And just like film, photography or public art have represented, in different aesthetic and documentary forms, the reach of gentrification, contemporary literature has also a great deal to offer.

[44] S. Jaffe, 'A block divided against itself' in J. Freeman, *Tales of Two Cities*, pp. 145-56
[45] DW Gibson, 'Partially vacated' in J. Freeman, *Tales of Two Cities*, pp. 58-70
[46] DW Gibson, *The Edge Becomes the Center: An Oral History of Gentrification in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, NY: The Overlook Press, 2015); Mendelson, *Morningside Heights*, p. 222

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